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Beyond factory safety: labor unions, militant protest, and the accelerated ambitions of Bangladesh's export garment industry

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between labor unions and labor precarity in Bangladesh's garment industry. After a string of high-profile factory disasters—including the 2013 collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory building—Bangladeshi labor unions have played a central role in new global initiatives to improve factory safety. These initiatives have provided an opportunity for unions to influence the governance of labor standards in a context of low levels of factory unionization. We argue that such global initiatives have deepened an existing divide between the conciliatory stance of mainstream, politically connected Bangladeshi unions and workers' more radical responses to precarity. Militant protests have advanced workers' interests historically, but are increasingly delegitimized and subject to violent crackdowns. This article contributes to our understanding of the fraught relationship between precarious workers and traditional labor unions by showing that when unions devote themselves to the technocratic improvement of labor standards without confronting the structural conditions of precarity itself, workers can be made more vulnerable—a situation that becomes heightened in a context of fast industrial expansion.

Keywords Bangladesh · Garment industry · Labor rights · Labor unions · Militancy · Safety

Introduction

In the weeks leading up to the 2017 Dhaka Apparel Summit—a high-profile international conference at which industry leaders and government officials would set out a glittering future

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for Bangladesh's export garment industry—labor unrest in the industrial district of Ashulia led to the temporary closure of 60 factories, firing of 1600 garment workers, and the arrest and detention of at least 35 workers and labor organizers. Negotiations for a new minimum wage agreement for the sector were overdue, and factory-based grievances over working conditions and late payments coalesced in October 2016 over the death of a garment worker in Ashulia, seemingly from overwork. Stimulated by labor groups working in the area, by December hundreds of workers had walked out of local factories and were calling for a tripling of the minimum wage, from 5300 to 16,000 taka (\$190) per month. Factory owners began suspending the troublemakers *en masse*, and the government responded by evoking its rights to preventative detention under the Special Powers Act (1974) to arrest labor organizers and detain workers.

The Dhaka Apparel Summit was scheduled for February 25, 2017, to be held in the five-star Pan Pacific Sonargaon hotel. Organized by the country's largest and most powerful industry body, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), the event's participants would include foreign dignitaries, representatives of Western fashion brands, international academics, agencies like the International Labour Organization (ILO), diplomats, and high-ranking government officials. Given that the Summit's aim was to showcase the country's commitment to the rapid growth and long-term sustainability of its export garment industry, the unrest in Ashulia was at best an embarrassment and at worst indicated a troubling state of labor relations. Summit organizers felt that the garment industry was emerging from the worst period in its history, when the image of "Made in Bangladesh" was dented by a string of deadly factory fires and collapses, including the 2013 collapse of the Rana Plaza building, which resulted in the loss of at least 1134 lives. Government efforts and international initiatives—including the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, a private inspection regime developed by global trade union federations, NGOs, and multinational apparel companies—were improving factory conditions and making the industry "safe" for workers and image-conscious brands (cf. Khan and Wichterich 2015; Neveling 2017). Bangladesh was ready to move out of the shadow of Rana Plaza and assert its ambitions to nearly double the size of the industry to \$50 billion by 2021—the fiftieth anniversary of national independence.

The arrest of workers and labor organizers in Ashulia displayed authoritarian tactics of labor suppression, from which global brands publicly sought to distance themselves. By mid-February, H&M, Inditex/Zara, C&A, Next, and Tchibo announced their intentions to boycott the Summit, and a representative from the UK-based Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) who was scheduled to speak at the event pulled out. Global trade union federations IndustriALL and UNI Global, along with various local and transnational labor advocacy groups, campaigned for the release of the detained workers and organizers. Under all of this pressure, 2 days before the Summit was due to begin, BGMEA, the labor ministry, and the national union federation IndustriALL Bangladesh Council (IBC) reached an agreement to release the workers and labor organizers, and the five brands agreed not to boycott the event. On February 25, the Summit proceeded as planned, displaying Bangladesh's ambitions for a fast-growing, profitable, and "sustainable" garment industry. Workers' safety, which would have dominated discussion just a year or two earlier, was considered to be a settled issue. Presentations at the event focused instead on how accelerating the garment industry's growth could propel Bangladesh into middle-income status—and thereby benefit the nation as a whole—if the labor movement was willing to maintain industrial harmony and address labor grievances through peaceful dialog with employers.

Set against the grand ambitions of the Dhaka Apparel Summit for a massively expanded garment industry, the firings, arrests, and detentions of workers in Ashulia represent a good starting place for thinking about precarity as a global labor condition and the dilemmas it poses for labor organizing. Bangladesh's comparative advantage as a provider of low-cost, "fast fashion" garments for global brands and retailers is maintained by imposing structural vulnerabilities on workers, including employment insecurity, long working hours, forced and extreme overtime, and low wages. The suppression of union organizing means that Bangladesh has few factory-based unions; at the same time, national union federations can be closely allied to political parties, and face widespread accusations of corruption and self-seeking. However, since before the Rana Plaza disaster but with increasing intensity in the months and years that followed, Bangladesh has become a laboratory of new initiatives to improve factory conditions without calling into question the underlying structure of the industry itself. Involving NGOs, multinational corporations, the ILO, local employers, and the state, these initiatives variously include organized labor at different levels, ranging from locally based informal workers' groups (often referred to as "committees" or "non-registered unions" because they do not satisfy legal requirements for formal recognition) to factory-based labor unions, national union federations, and global union federations headquartered in Europe or North America. Participation in these initiatives has become a new type of activity for Bangladeshi labor unions, distinct from addressing the routine needs and disputes of union members in their workplaces (Zajak 2017; Khan and Wichterich 2015).

In this article we draw on ethnographic field research in the Bangladesh garment industry and with stakeholders based in Europe to explore the changing role of labor unions in a context of labor precarity where experiments to improve factory safety are driven by international actors.¹ We describe a bifurcation in the labor movement, in which national union federations with little workplace presence participate in high-level, foreign-led initiatives. Meanwhile, factory workers prioritize tactics of coping with extreme overtime and wages insufficient to reproduce their labor power. These workers are less likely to belong to a labor union than to be involved in informal resistance and, under certain conditions, militant labor protest of the kind seen in Ashulia. We build our analysis of the dangerous and widening gap between formal labor unions and the day-to-day experiences of workers with three arguments. First, the industry's consensus that Bangladeshi garment factories are now safe is based on a narrowly technocratic view of safety that neglects how structural conditions of precarity routinely produce violence, coercion, and ill-health for workers. Second, labor unions' increasing participation in safety initiatives has deepened an existing division between the formal trade union movement and workers' everyday forms of coping, resistance, and protest. Third, this widening gap between formal labor unions and workers' everyday experiences and protests leaves workers exposed to a continuing erosion of labor rights. Militant labor protests have advanced workers' interests, but such practices are increasingly subject to state repression and violent crackdowns. We depict an industry thriving on growing precarity with scant attempts to confront its structural underpinnings.

¹ Hasan Ashraf has conducted ethnographic research in Bangladesh's garment industry since 2010, including factory-based participant observation, interviews with workers and labor organizers outside of the workplace, observing labor mobilizations and protests (detailed in this article), and attendance at industry events such as the 2017 Dhaka Apparel Summit. Since 2014, Rebecca Prentice has conducted research on Bangladesh's post-Rana Plaza garment industry with a range of European-based actors and institutions, including in-depth interviews with representatives from global trade union federations, multinational fashion brands, labor rights NGOs, and the ILO.

Our analysis of Bangladeshi garment workers relies upon an understanding that labor in the global South has “always-already been precarious” (Munck 2013, p. 752). This means seeing precarity as a longstanding condition originating in processes of proletarianization that create the need to sell one’s labor in social and institutional environments of unequal power (Denning 2010), and not just an exceptional one linked to neoliberal capitalism (Cross 2010). This approach allows us to remember that the work of social reproduction that disproportionately falls on women is an inherent feature of the waged labor contract, and that this work of maintaining, nourishing, and reproducing the labor force is itself a source of value for capital (Federici 2012; Kabeer 2004). Our ethnography highlights the lived and embodied experiences of these conditions with special attention to how Bangladesh’s garment industry is organized to periodically extract value from workers with an intensity and pace that exceeds their ability to meet their daily needs for nourishment and rest (cf. Karim 2014).

The following two sections discuss the literature on labor unions and the post-Rana Plaza garment industry. Then, given Bangladeshi labor unions’ participation in foreign-driven “global” efforts to improve the safety of factory buildings, we turn to a garment factory in Dhaka to show how “safety” from the point of view of workers is preeminently concerned with the ability to meet subsistence needs with dignity and well-being. With a second ethnographic case of labor protests at “SL Sweater” factory in 2011, we examine the conditions under which workers protest militantly. In light of recent calls from the BGMEA and the Bangladesh government for a more conciliatory labor movement, the final section connects the 2011 protests to the conditions facing garment workers today, by considering how “peaceful negotiations” can be used to silence workers’ demands. Situating these arguments within Bangladesh’s current push to accelerate the growth of its garment industry by offering labor on conditions that appeal to global capital, we show that plans for industry expansion rely upon expectations of a conciliatory labor movement that are out of step with workers’ histories and experiences. This article contributes to our understanding of the fraught relationship between precarious workers and traditional labor unions by showing that when unions devote themselves to the technocratic improvement of labor standards without confronting the structural conditions of precarity itself, workers can be stranded with little power to effect change except through militant confrontations that are violently suppressed.

Labor unions in Bangladesh’s readymade garment industry

The agreement to release detained workers and labor organizers on the eve of the 2017 Dhaka Apparel Summit was announced by Mujibul Haque Chunnu, the State Minister of Labour and Employment, in a televised press conference. In his remarks on the labor unrest, he described the protestors as “vandals,” emphasizing the harm that is done to Bangladesh’s international reputation by irresponsible and destructive forms of labor mobilization. Standing alongside the President of BGMEA, the Minister announced that in order to curb militancy and vandalism (*bhangchur*), informal labor groups (including those known as “non-registered” labor unions) would now be banned in all industrial hubs. Also standing with the Minister was Amirul Haque Amin, the President of the National Garment Workers’ Federation (NGWF) and IndustriALL Bangladesh Council (IBC), a national labor union federation affiliated with the global federation headquartered in Switzerland. The presence of IBC’s president gave the impression that the union endorsed the ban on informal labor organizing.

The history of labor unions in Bangladesh stretches back to the British colonial period, when leftist unions were involved in anti-colonial and nationalist struggles. As Rahman and Langford (2012) write, both before and after independence in 1971, unions sought patronage and support from political parties and did not have a strong presence in workplaces. It was not until the 1980s—and particularly following the 1990 fire at Saraka Garments that killed 27 workers—that an oppositional labor movement took shape in the quickly-growing export garment industry, alongside the more “collaborationist” labor unions allied with the two main political parties (Rahman and Langford 2012, pp. 91, 98). With the state’s vested interest in a profitable garment sector, this kind of independent labor activism has been suppressed through legal restrictions and violence and intimidation against workers attempting to unionize (Siddiqi 2017, p. 70, Hurley 2005, pp. 129–131).

The situation has led, in part, to a bifurcation of the labor movement, in which many national union federations are more closely tied to political parties than to the shop floor, while smaller and under-resourced labor groups (including unions too small to be formally registered) attempt to organize garment workers amidst threats of violence by factory owners and hired thugs. Local labor groups and spontaneous worker protests have achieved several victories, for example, the mass uprisings of 2006 that led to the creation of a sector-wide Minimum Wage Board (Siddiqi 2017, pp. 72–74; cf. Ahmed et al. 2014, p. 266). It is precisely these kinds of local-level groups that the Minister of Labour and Employment and the BGMEA accused of stoking the Ashulia protests in 2016–2017.

Throughout the global South, garment factories are rarely unionized. This is partly due to the fact that global supply chains seek out—and reproduce—niches of “insecure, non-unionized, low-wage” workers (Muhammad 2015, p. 144; Tsing 2009). Attempts to unionize workers are made harder by legal restrictions, intimidation against organizers, and the threat of corporate flight, but local unions also struggle to meet the complex needs of workers employed in the garment sector, such as migrant laborers and women (De Neve 2008; Ruwanpura 2015). Negative perceptions of labor unions range from the idea that they are too rigid, rule-bound, and geographically fixed to accusations of corruption, illegitimacy, and indebtedness to political elites (cf. Kesküla and Sanchez this issue; Zajak 2017). The rise of a transnational labor movement has provided opportunities for activists to “jump scale” (Merk 2009) from the local to the global by linking shop-floor grievances with activists and consumer groups in countries where brands are headquartered and sold. This type of global networking has become re-embedded in countries like Bangladesh, where new institutions of transnational and private labor governance are now “layered” (Zajak 2017; Anner 2012) on top of weak national labor regulations. Transnational governance mechanisms remain unpopular in Bangladesh because they circumvent and marginalize state institutions to prevent harms to workers as defined by powerful and image-sensitive global brands (Sumon 2016).

Union membership among Bangladeshi garment workers is low, with estimates of ranging from 5 to 10%, while unionization is banned entirely in the few export processing zones (Ahmed et al. 2014, p. 266; Bair et al. 2017, p. 48; Khan and Wichterich 2015, pp. 7–9). Since Rana Plaza, the fracturing of the labor movement along political party alliances now incorporates outward global solidarity as well. External links and foreign donor money can serve as a protective shield for national labor union federations and their leaders, but these are usually accompanied by foreign-initiated agendas that may be different from workers’ own needs (cf. Siddiqi 2015, p. 172). An important question is how the new initiatives of the post-Rana Plaza era affect the abilities of unions to organize and represent workers, given that the voracity and unpredictability of the global apparel market has not fundamentally changed. Recent studies

suggest a mixed picture, with many obstacles to labor organizing and union registration, but also new opportunities for information sharing and lodging complaints (cf. Khan and Wichterich 2015; Zajak 2017). In this article we suggest that foregrounding the structural precarity of garment workers reveals the labor movement's neglect of workers' everyday experiences, and the dangers this poses in situations of labor unrest where workers do not have effective outlets for their grievances.

Factory safety before and after Rana Plaza

“The apparel industry of Bangladesh is at the dawn of a new era in its development, with unprecedented safety standards being adopted and great strides being taken towards achieving environmental and sustainable targets.” – BGMEA, conference materials at the 2017 Dhaka Apparel Summit

The Rana Plaza collapse was the worst industrial disaster in garment manufacturing history. The eight-story building was built in circumvention of national building codes, and collapsed on the morning of April 24, 2013 when a routine power outage stimulated four diesel generators that had been improperly installed (Motlagh 2014, p. 66). Cracks were discovered in the building's edifice the day before, and Rana Plaza had been evacuated. The banks and retail spaces on the bottom floors remained closed, but garment workers were made to return to the factories on the upper levels because of production deadlines. Tragically, the opposition party had called a nationwide strike for April 24, and because the owner of Rana Plaza was an activist in the ruling Awami League, he was under pressure to show that “his” factories were operating as usual that day.

News of the collapse dominated national and international headlines for weeks, and catalyzed reform. The Bangladesh Labor Act was amended to reduce barriers to union formation and minimum wages doubled (Bair et al. 2017, pp. 46–48). Many of these reforms, like the wage increase to 5300 taka (\$63) per month, occurred only after mass labor mobilizations on the part of workers (Siddiqi 2017). Although legislative reforms led to an increase in factory-based unions from 138 in 2013 to 540 by 2017, applicants found themselves subject to many of the same obstructions as existed before, especially leftist and radical unions without affiliation with or financial support from global trade union federations (Siddiqi 2015, p. 171). The high threshold of 30% of workers needed to form a union violates international standards (ILRF 2015, p. 31).

Since the Rana Plaza collapse, a variety of foreign initiatives have been launched to improve factory conditions, largely focused on building safety. The most prominent of these is the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety (“the Accord”), a voluntary, 5-year (2013–2018) agreement between multinational apparel companies and organized labor (principally global union federations) to inspect and upgrade factory buildings (Reinecke and Donaghey 2015). Pointing to the evident failures of the state-based inspection system, the Accord requires signatories to commit to minimum standards, maintain consistent sourcing levels in Bangladesh, and submit to private inspection of their supplier factories for fire, electrical, and structural safety. The Accord generated huge excitement among labor advocates around the world by newly binding companies to contractual liability for factory conditions where their

products are manufactured (Bair et al. 2017; Reinecke and Donaghey 2015; Sumon 2016).²

As a pact between global union federations and multinational apparel companies—with the ILO serving as neutral chair and NGOs as witnesses—the Accord suggests a vital new role for labor unions representing workers' interests in high-level negotiations. The Accord does not require signatories to source from unionized factories, but establishes non-union forms of worker participation on “Worker Participation Committees” (WPCs) and “Health and Safety Committees” (HSCs). Such committees—which carry out worker representation requirements in the 2013 amendments to the Bangladesh Labour Act and are directed towards safety concerns—are supposed to be elected by their peers, though employers have been known to appoint pro-management representatives (Bair et al. 2017, pp. 46–47; Khan and Wichterich 2015, pp. 34–35). If these forms of worker participation have attenuated the long urge among workers for more factory unions, strengthening labor unions at a global level may be happening in tandem with their weakening on the shop floor.

The intention of the Accord is to make Bangladeshi garment factories safe from fire and building collapse, but as Hasan Ashraf (2017) has argued, in ways that depoliticize the issue by rendering it a technical matter devoid of labor politics. The need to prevent another such disaster has focused on the physical vulnerability of buildings, to render Bangladeshi suppliers safe for investment by image-conscious brands (Neveling 2017). This approach neglects the profitability of precarity itself: that the low manufacturing costs that draw multinational companies to Bangladesh are a function of the lack of labor voice that itself leads to unsafe conditions. The longstanding suppression of labor mobilization is what made the Rana Plaza collapse so deadly, because workers fearful of entering a visibly cracked building had no capacity to refuse unsafe work (ILRF 2015).

Although some scholars and labor advocates caution that factory upgrades are behind schedule and therefore the factories are far from safe, industry insiders—including multinational apparel companies, the BGMEA, and the Bangladesh government—proclaim that the safety problem has been resolved. Take, for example, the 2017 Dhaka Apparel Summit, organized to showcase the industry to investors and world-leading experts from business, government, and civil society. As the Prime Minister stated in her opening address, “Our [garment] industry has been revamped with a view to ensuring predominantly safe, compliant and eco-friendly industry.” Conference materials, presentations, and discussions at the Summit emphasized two things: that the safety problems that had plagued Bangladesh are over and that industrial harmony will be required to reach Bangladesh's ambitious target of a \$50 billion garment industry by 2021.

The industry consensus that underpins the 2021 goal requires a particular conceptualization of safety (as technocratic) and of industrial harmony (as a conciliatory stance where labor engages in peaceful and productive “dialog” with employers). Workers are invited to participate in social dialog from a weak position, with no effort to enhance their capacity to exert their own power (Khan and Wichterich 2015, p. 41). As Andrew Sanchez (2016, pp. 84–102) has described among industrial workers in India, when labor internalizes the idea that industrial harmony is the legitimate cost of economic growth, its compromise with industry

² Two similar inspection regimes were developed around the same time as the Accord: the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, and a government initiative known as the National Tripartite Plan of Action (NAP). The Alliance was created by American brands and does not involve unions. NAP includes a number of national-level activities, including the legislative reforms and commitment to inspecting the 1500 garment factories covered by neither the Accord nor the Alliance (Ashraf 2017, p. 256).

often comes at the expense of the most precarious workers. In the next two sections, we draw on ethnographic research to show how the idea of safety put forward by the Accord neglects this global industry's strategic use of precarity to discipline and extract value from the labor force. Workers' attempts at peaceful negotiation are easily dismissed, and militant protest erupts when workers perceive there to be no other choice.

Labor power and bodies “safely” at work

“*Bol bol nijer bol; jol jol nodir jol.*”

(Labor is to the body as water to the river).

– Nilofar Yasmin, a worker at Asha Garments, 2011

When the production manager at Asha Garments—a medium-sized knitwear factory producing t-shirts, sleepwear, tops, and jackets—announced to employees after 14 hours of work that they would need to work one more hour, Nilofar uttered the above Bangla saying to Hasan Ashraf in 2011. A foreign buyer would be visiting the factory in 2 days, and workers were under huge pressure (*chaap*) to keep up with deadlines. Returning to her work, Nilofar explained:

“Working in a garment factory is more laboring than it left us with adequate time to rest, and to recover from all tension, pressure, tiredness, exhaustion, mistreatment and burns of insults. Whatever target we fulfil is not enough. Each day at the factory comes with a higher target. It repeats day after day. This is endless. This makes a weak body (*shorir durbol*). This has become a loop (*chakra*): the factory demands more, makes the body weaker and demand more from that weak body. You won't find anyone who has a healthy body (*shustho shorir*) without illness in garments. Garment work depreciates (*khoy*) a body faster. As long as I have energy in my body I can work to meet life's demands.”

Labor conditions in Bangladesh's garment industry have shocked the world and led to injury, death, and suffering. Less attended to are the more subtle and diffuse ways in which garment production consumes the bodies of workers as a normal part of the labor process. The global garment industry relies on what Alessandra Mezzadri (2017) has called a “sweatshop regime,” where capital accumulates from the systematic depletion of laboring bodies, and insecure workers lack the time or money to replenish the bodies that production depletes (cf. Karim 2014; Wright 2006). Feelings similar to Nilofar's were frequently expressed on the shop floor by other workers and even mid-level staff. As one line supervisor put it, “Working in a garment factory means you have agreed to reduce your lifetime. It is an innate part of the job, and inescapable.”

Such “everyday emergencies” of precarity (Millar 2014, p. 34) are manifest in the closure of unsafe factories. One of the most common criticisms of the Accord is that factories perceived to be at risk of collapse must be closed immediately (Ashraf 2017, pp. 266–267). Smaller hazards can be remediated, often without disruption to factory production schedules. Where factories have been shut down, hundreds or even thousands of workers can lose their jobs in an instant; employers violate the official policy of continuing payments for furloughed workers. In such instances, workers' lack of money for food or housing threatens their very

lives: an irony when the building inspections that threw them out of work were undertaken to save them.

In 2011, workers at Asha Garments worked for 46 consecutive days without a day's break to meet the shipment deadlines set by a multinational apparel brand. When it became obvious to factory management that the deadline would be nearly impossible to meet, they lengthened the workday and did not allow weekend breaks. Management felt unable to renegotiate with the buyer because the finished items were already scheduled to be sent via shipping container.

Instead of maintaining an 8-hourly shift system with different sets of workers, it is common practice for factories use the same employees to work long hours. The workers at Asha Garments found themselves on prolonged day and night shifts on consecutive days without break. They were given a banana and a piece of cake at 10 pm, 6 to 8 hours after lunch, with the expectation of eating rice when they finally got home. Overtime was mandatory. As the deadline neared, work became unbearable. When workers became sick, managers simply said, "If you cannot work, then do not come." With rent to pay and food to buy, workers had little means to challenge the situation. Managers were quick to divide and reallocate workers in sections where a sense of collectivity appeared to be forming. Although there were union offices not far from the factory, there could be little outreach to workers who spend long days and nights in the factory. Workers knew that if they visited union offices word was likely to get back to their employers.

After 3 weeks, workers talking of their exhaustion and frustration reached a collective decision to halt production if the upcoming Thursday was not declared a day off. The workers' eyes were red and exhausted. The day of the collective decision, Shumi, a 26-year-old senior machine operator said loudly without addressing anyone directly,

"This cannot go on like this. We are human too. Everything has a limit. Don't we have family to give time to? We came here to work to feed our stomach with rice. This doesn't mean we are here to die. Don't we need rest? What do these motherfuckers think we are? Machines?"

Ordinarily, Shumi would be reprimanded by the supervisors but everyone remained silent. Two line supervisors stayed on the shop floor and the rest went to the managing director's office to discuss the situation. Workers remained seated at their machines, waiting. Shumi stood leaning on her machine. When a supervisor tried to talk to her, Shumi gave him an angry look and once again silence reigned. One supervisor later told Hasan Ashraf that he became scared that workers would start vandalizing the factory or set it on fire.

After the workers were given a break, the managing director came to the floor and asked all to listen to him carefully. He explained that the shipment could not be postponed. To save the factory, he asked them to work on Thursday but not all day. He said that it was not only the workers who were suffering. The factory owners and other senior staff could not sleep properly out of anxiety and *chaap*. Some stayed in the office around the clock. Workers accepted the request. Work resumed. Workers were given a half-day break on Thursdays until the shipment was complete.

Workers know that foreign buyers do not pay for orders until they receive them, and so at Asha Garments, they believed that the greatest risk was not being paid for work already done. In a context where labor has little power or protection, workers consent to a physically punishing schedule because they understand it to be a temporary—though recurring—requirement of producing for a voracious and unpredictable global market. This consent can only be fully understood with a wider appreciation of how a global industry premised on unequal power suppresses labor organizing. Workers rarely dare to organize collectively; they know that managers can enlist thugs in the labor

colonies to report back on any organizing efforts. It is telling that Shumi and the other workers at Asha Garments openly challenged the long hours only when the shared experience of exhaustion led them to feel they had no other choice. As the next section will show, worker grievances stem from an assault on dignity and well-being that is a fundamental component of labor precarity. When these grievances accumulate with no solution or outlet—and attempts at “dialog” with their employers fail—it explodes into militant protest.

Labor movement as “vandalism”: the story of the SL sweater factory protests

“We make noise because we are not heard. We make noise because we are not seen. Vandalism [*bhangchur*] never is the first step. It happened when we stood with our backs against the wall and had nothing left to lose and attacked.”

– Garment worker after a police crackdown on labor protests, Dhaka, August 11, 2011

The SL Sweater factory in Dhaka has since the early 1990s produced sweaters for brand-name companies like Gap, H&M, and Zara. A so-called “compliance factory” certified by international standards like ISO and WRAP, SLS is as one factory manager put it, “obviously a good factory.” SLS’s 1400 workers have a different view. Workers were paid not a standard wage but based on what they produced: 37 taka (\$0.44) per finished sweater as of fieldwork in 2011. If production is ever halted for lack of orders or because of labor protest, “no work no pay” is the policy. The general manager of SLS is a retired army major who introduced “iron” discipline and high-speed production. Over the years, workdays became longer, until mandatory overtime and 13 hours days were the norm. Workers found the military-style management particularly offensive when it came to the type of speech to which they were subjected, including humiliating insults and sexualized language to berate both female and male workers.

Workers knew that if they tried to form a union they risked getting fired. However, among the permanent employees were some individuals who had visited the offices of trade union federations, participated in May Day processions, and even belonged to trade unions independently. A small group of mostly male workers in the knitting section created a list of demands to present to management. Prepared in the labor colony rather than at the factory, the 12 demands represented grievances that had accumulated over time and reached crisis when a female co-worker was publicly insulted by her supervisor. They demanded the following:

1. Freedom at work.
2. Approval of applications for leave, if genuine and imperative for the worker.
3. Granting workers short leave (2 to 6 hours) for personal emergencies.
4. Raise the piece-rate for each sweater from 37 taka (\$0.44) to 41 taka (\$0.49).
5. Increase in presence bonus (*hajira* bonus).
6. Payment on time.
7. If any night [shift] takes place, then food (*tiffin*) has to be provided.
8. Reschedule daily duty from 8 am to 7 pm [not 8 am to 9 pm].
9. An end to firing workers (*sromik chatai*) at will and without proper cause.
10. Supervisors and in-charges must not use abusive words or expletives against workers.
11. Factory authorities must not use any bad words against female employees.
12. Factory authority must stop harassing workers outside of the factory.

This attempt at “peaceful negotiation” was received by management with assurances that workers’ demands would be taken seriously, but nothing was done about it. As one worker said later, “We never wanted this, fighting with the riot police... It is unjust that we cannot claim our minimum just rights. We had demands and we submitted these to the factory authorities.” When no response was forthcoming from management, on July 11, workers called a halt to production (*kormo-bitori*); although not everyone participated, the action was significant enough to affect production deadlines. Management assured workers once again that changes would be made. When no improvements were made by July 30, those who had submitted the 12 demands focused on one new demand: the removal of the general manager, whom they blamed for the factory’s punitive disciplinary style.

On the morning of August 2, a list of the names of 60 workers perceived as troublemakers was hung by the main factory gate. The workers were informed that they were under suspension. Although the security guards attempted to check timecards so they could not enter the factory, some of the banned workers managed to get inside. As part of the uproar that ensued, a security guard was locked in the toilet, with physical altercation between the dismissed workers and the factory loaders who served as management’s “musclemen” (*maliker chamcha*). A local government representative was called to enter the factory with the local ward commissioner’s son and police, and the workers were cleared from the site late in the day. The factory authority filed a police case against the 60 workers based on several articles of the extant Bangladesh Penal Code, 1860, including “unlawful assembly,” “voluntarily causing hurt,” and “mischief causing damage.” One worker was arrested at home that evening. The next morning began a lockout during which the factory remained shuttered and the workers were not earning.

BGMEA maintains a labor arbitration cell to mediate disputes between workers and a BGMEA member. On August 8, workers were invited to the BGMEA office to take part in “dialog.” Although many workers turned up for the meeting, those invited inside were handpicked by management, and the meetings did not resolve the grievances. The decision was taken that the factory would re-open the next day, but 137 workers (110 male, 27 female) including the original 60 workers, would not be welcomed back.

On August 11, an additional 132 names were posted on the factory gate, bringing the total number of workers dismissed to 269. The factory was open that morning, and the dismissed workers managed to get into the factory grounds. They would not receive wages for the previous month because they were now considered to be “under a legal process,” which added stress and anger to the situation because shopkeepers and landlords would be demanding payments that week. The unrest spread from SLS factory to the adjacent streets as workers from nearby factories joined in the protest.

The Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and Industrial Police were deployed, at the behest of factory owners. Teargas canisters and more than 100 rubber bullets were fired on the workers, who tried to resist with broken bricks. The large glass windows of other factories and a nearby mall were shattered. Traffic stopped, windshields were broken, and the roadside shops had to close in a busy part of Dhaka. Nearby factories halted production and some locked the workers inside to prevent them joining the crowds.

By the end of the day, the SLS factory gate was heavily guarded by more than 100 members of law enforcement. Most of them wore helmets, bulletproof jackets, shin pads, and held shields, batons, and lathis (pieces of stick made of raw wood or processed cane). A large yellow water cannon and three police cars were parked outside along with a prison van. In the end, the protestors were subdued, and many of the 269 dismissed workers were coerced into

signing “voluntary” resignation letters—sometimes only a signature on a blank piece of paper. The next day, national media headlines reduced the incident to garment workers vandalizing vehicles on the street. The protest at the SLS factory was represented as yet another *bhangchur*, collective labor militancy recast as senseless vandalism.

The SLS incident is an example of militant protest when workers’ demands are ignored and suppressed. It shows a swift militarized state response, and factory bosses’ lack of appetite for “peaceful negotiation.” A few weeks before these events, labor union federations marched in May Day parades with banners declaring, “Workers of the world, unite!” but unions in Bangladesh have little role in factory-based grievances. At the time of the SLS protests, there were 17 different labor union federations who, for their part, focused efforts on public displays of solidarity and various forms of juridical activism. Since the Rana Plaza collapse, these outward reaching efforts have extended further, with the influence of foreign donor money and the invitation to collaborate on bigger agendas, projects, and agreements like the Accord that seek to improve labor conditions without upending the global structural inequalities on which the industry is based. With such initiatives, the gap between the federations’ conciliatory tone and actions and workers’ own responses to their experiences of precarity have widened.

No place for militancy in a harmonious future?

Critics of the labor protest in Ashulia, just as in the SL Sweater Factory dispute, say that workers too readily opt for destructive forms of labor protest, *bhangchur* (vandalism) that is harmful to the industry. This disapproving narrative was voiced frequently at the 2017 Dhaka Apparel Summit. The government, BGMEA, and multinational apparel companies are invested in the growth and prosperity of Bangladesh’s garment industry, and have been united in their suggestion that what the industry needs—and what would be best for workers—is more harmony and peaceful negotiation. The Accord is a model of this approach: a private inspection regime created by non-Bangladeshi actors to circumvent government processes, all in the name of protecting workers’ vulnerable bodies when the state will not (Sumon 2016). The worker participation committees that have been established in factories under the Accord represent a non-conflictual forum mostly dedicated to health and safety matters. As Khan and Wichterich 2015, p. 41) put it, “the role of workers’ participation is a means to the end of ensuring safety standards in the RMG factories rather than building labour power vis-à-vis capital.” What the Accord proposes, after all, is the technocratic promise that labor standards can be improved even in the absence of labor rights.

Although the SLS protests occurred in 2011, before the Rana Plaza collapse and all the new initiatives, programs, and policies that followed, the experience of SLS workers resonates with those who protested in Ashulia in 2016–2017. The structural conditions of Bangladesh’s global garment industry have not changed substantially over that time, with the suppression of formal worker power still a key method for making “cheap” labor available to global capital. The SLS example shows that when workers are brought to the table to “negotiate” with their employers, particularly without the institutional backing and legal protections of a labor union structure, they are at a disadvantage. The workers tried to negotiate peacefully for decent wages and fair working conditions, but these attempts quickly become co-opted by employers. Industry and government leaders, as well as the high-profile attendees at the Dhaka Apparel Summit, present a similar message: that there is no place for militancy in this industry. But as the workers at both Asha Garments and SLS would argue, their employers squeeze

them as much as they can. Without the leverage of militant protest, they are not heard. One of the SLS workers used a Bangla proverb to explain this: “A mother doesn’t give milk to her baby if it doesn’t cry.”

The harmonious vision planned for Bangladesh’s industry in 2021 is defective because it fails to account for two things. First, that Bangladesh’s comparative advantage in the global economy is its low labor costs. Far from being a natural condition, this labor has been actively cheapened by processes of labor precarization: suppressing mobilization and keeping wages and labor standards low (Muhammad 2015). Although initiatives like the Accord improve building safety and create new mechanisms for expressing worker grievances, they can leave untouched the fundamental conditions of the industry: long hours and punishing conditions, with very little leverage for workers to change their circumstances. The depletion of workers’ bodies is a source of profit when meager wages are insufficient to nourish workers and contribute to their daily reproduction. Workers bear the contradictions of an industry premised simultaneously on their labor power and their political powerlessness across a global terrain.

The second thing that the harmonious vision does not account for is that militant labor protests are an important means for workers to advance their interests, even though they are increasingly subject to state repression and violent crackdowns. As Rahman and Langford (2012, p. 102) put it, “soft, non-confrontational approaches are totally ineffective in Bangladesh.” In the bright future of a \$50 billion garment industry, there is said to be no place for labor militancy. Yet, the global structural precarity upon which the industry is built may create *more* demand for militancy when workers find no formal means for exercising power. Workers have turned to militant protest not only because the extremity of the threats to their livelihoods and well-being has pushed them to do so, but also because this kind of protest is effective.

Conclusion

In Bangladesh, there has long been a division between established and politically connected national union federations, and radical unions that are more closely tied to workers’ everyday experiences. Since the Rana Plaza collapse, this divide has only deepened and extended, with global unions and their national federation counterparts increasingly involved in formal negotiations, representations, and mediations at a high level, while local (often unregistered) unions may be more engaged with the substantive issues that workers face, as seen on the streets of Ashulia in 2016 and 2017. Although global union federations are not the subject of this article, we suggest a need to examine the impacts of foreign-led initiatives and donor money on shop-floor struggles.

As our ethnography shows, Bangladeshi workers are subject to risks in the form of labor precarity and the inability to sustain themselves, as well as dehumanizing treatment and attacks on their ability to organize around their collective interests. Since the collapse of Rana Plaza, it is common to hear commentators—journalists, scholars, and members of the business community—describe the reforms that were enacted afterwards as a “Rana Plaza effect.” Within such a narrative, terrible labor conditions were newly exposed, and the combined response from industry, government, civil society, and consumers led, naturally, to labor reform. What this narrative leaves out is the ongoing, sometimes militant protest of workers in rebellion against precarious conditions. Or, as Dina Siddiqi (2017, p. 61) puts it, “The persuasive power of this narrative depends upon the active forgetting of the past in which

workers have secured meaningful change only after embarking on direct action through often violent street protests.” Post-Rana Plaza reforms such as the December 2013 doubling of the minimum wage only came to pass after mass mobilizations, marches, and human chains in places like Ashulia.

Amidst new global safety initiatives in Bangladesh, this widening gap between established labor unions oriented towards international partnerships and projects, and workers’ experiences and protests leaves workers exposed to further erosion of labor rights. If unions are not more involved in factory-level organizing, workers are left to choose between anodyne participation on worker committees and spontaneous, militant protest when simmering grievances bubble over. The real danger of this widening gap—a danger we suggest becomes heightened when an agenda of swift industrial growth demands tighter control of labor—is that militant protest is increasingly criminalized and violently suppressed. This means that workers who feel they have no other choice but to protest militantly face severe consequences not only from employers but also from the state. Just as the government showed in the days before the Dhaka Apparel Summit (and as workers at SLS found in 2011), workers who insist on militant protest will find themselves quickly controlled by a state committed to its own vision of a safe and prosperous garment industry which looks very different from what workers on the streets of Ashulia have been demanding.

Our focus on Bangladesh contributes to debates on the relationship between labor unions and precarity a reminder that precarity is profitable—both nationally and globally. Bangladesh’s garment industry depends upon the laboring bodies of millions of women and men whose physical vulnerability was shown in the Rana Plaza collapse. Our ethnography demonstrates that the global garment industry profits not only from the labor of these workers but also from their vulnerability through its periodic capacity extract value with an intensity and speed that exceeds workers’ ability to rest, nourish, and restore themselves. For workers, recuperating that value is a political matter, not a technical one.

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